

“Treasures of the Mishkan Museum of Art”

Smadar Sheffi, [the Window](#), 1.10.2018



The current exhibition celebrating the 80th anniversary of the Mishkan Museum of Art, Ein Harod, proposes an alternate reading of the current Israeli art narrative. Curated by Yaniv Shapira, this fascinating exhibition is drawn from the Museum’s collection which comprises tens of thousands of items. The exhibition gives rise to an outlook on the present and the future, no less than a view of the past. If we tend to think of contemporary Israeli art as an outcome, reaction, or evolution of the past, here we can see several of the pathways open to Israeli art and contemplate the paths not taken.

The works that most challenge the consensus, and to a great extent offer an innovative look at the history of Israeli art, are in three spaces, under the titles “Daily life in the *shtetl*” (as if there were no need to specify that these are the Jewish townlets of Eastern Europe), and “Pogroms, exile, Holocaust.” They feature works by European Jewish artists from the early 20th century to World War II (and works clearly associated with the war, although made later, such as Naftali Bezem’s *Mass Grave*, from the 1960s). The exhibition is a re-visit and re-evaluation of the huge oeuvre marginalized due to complex reasons. On one hand, the original curatorial prism of the Museum (founded in 1937) “negated the Diaspora” (according to the attitude in the Zionist

institutions) while on the other hand, during the period dominated by formalistic criteria dominated, many of the artists, especially from Eastern Europe, were considered provincial.

The long-standing Francophile trend in mainstream Israeli art, especially New Horizons, which continued until the 1970s, contributed to this attitude. The very fact of art being in the collection cracks what in the past was considered a categorical narrative of the kibbutz movement severing itself from the past. The Mishkan Museum of Art grew from an “art corner” in the studio hut of painter and kibbutz member Haim Atar (1902-1953), who initiated the establishment of the Museum. Some of the works were brought to the country by Atar, who made his European journey when war was imminent. Others were donated to the Museum over the years. Reading these artworks from within the contemporary discourse on immigration, refugees, and conservation of culture as a value-based stand, illuminates this section of the exhibition as a reflection on the present.

Among the outstanding works are a portrait and cityscape by Mela Muter, a superb artist barely known in Israel, although she was acclaimed in Poland and France; and a penetrating portrait of Leopold Gottlieb by Roman Kramsztyk, a painter well-known during his lifetime, who was murdered in the Holocaust. Portraits by Max Liebermann and Jozef Israëls further reinforce the standing of these two excellent artists. The paintings of the riots and pogroms of Maurycy Manikowski, especially his *Jewish Refugee Family* (1915) and the picture of the shtetl in Josef Budko's *Marketplace* are chilling.

Entering the Museum, the visitor encounters the first hall, titled “Ein Harod,” which displays works referring directly to kibbutz life in general and to Ein Harod in particular, as a socialist utopia. Ein Harod still holds an honoured place in the history of the kibbutz movement. It split into two in 1951 as did many kibbutzim, when the general Kibbutz Movement, of which Ein Harod holds an honoured place. (Kibbutz Ein Harod split into two, when the General Kibbutz Movement split into Ihud and Meuhad kibbutzim in 1951 due to ideological differences). Here, along with preparatory architectural drawings by Samuel Bickels, who designed the Museum's unique building, the visitor can find contemporary Israeli artist Hadar Gad's small painting of the kibbutz cemetery, its “necropolis,” site of memory and testimony of the price of realizing the utopia. The small, melancholy painting is an interesting choice; an overall view of the exhibition reveals its connection to the works displayed in the halls devoted to European Jewish artists. Gad's painting is suffused with oppressive silence yet avoids pathos.

However, pathos associated with passionate pioneering idealism, is present in Harel Luz's photomontage which transforms the Jezreel Valley into a kitsch landscape looking like a painting

on a box of Swiss chocolates. Moshe Mokady's portrait of Haim Atar (1924) is excellent, as is Zvi Aldubi's sculpture *King Saul at Endor*. In a relatively small room the portrait of Ein Harod is delineated as being firmly rooted in recent and distant history of the Emek – the Jezreel Valley – and of the Gilboa region, hinting at an almost mystical direct line leading from ancient to modern times inculcating it with a sense of mission.

The physical marginalization of the only work by Joseph Zaritsky in the exhibition, placing it in a corner niche at the edge of the section titled "Israeli Abstraction" is thought-provoking. It might be seen as a proposal for a re-reading of the prevailing narrative of Israeli art that identifies Israeli abstraction entirely with the New Horizons movement headed by Zaritsky. Two years ago, Shapira curated the exhibit "A New Horizon for *New Horizons*" (as co-curator with Prof. Galia Ballas and Dalia Danon); now it seems that he had new thoughts on his working definition in the previous exhibition.

The thematic division of the exhibition lies along historical and geographic axes, illuminating what the Mishkan views as the "center" and as the reigning historical narrative. Thus, for example, there is a room titled "South" – but no "North." The relevant room is called "Ingathering of the Exiles" (and not "Immigrant Artists"), a choice that resonates with the Zionist movement of Jewish national revival. The works are good for the most part, as well as characteristic of the artists, such as Meir Pichhadze's large work. Among the surprises in this hall are two works by Valery Bobrov from 1992, a painted collage of symbols, road signs and pieces of landscape, like a lexicon of his new culture, and the excellent "Wedding in the Catskills" (1968-1978) by Yefim Ladizhinsky. Ladizhinsky, who immigrated to Israel, was bitterly disappointed by his reception. Looking at paintings by contemporary Israeli artists such as Shay Azoulay or Shimon Pinto at their best, it is apparent that Ladizhinsky was about three decades ahead of his time.

Other outstanding works are a superb self-portrait by Motti Mizrahi (1978) exhibited in the space devoted to "Faith and Prayer"; paintings by Yehoshua Isaac Eshel, which were exhibited about 20 years ago in "Hebrew Work: The Disregarded Gaze in the Canon of Israeli Art" at the Mishkan Museum, curated by Galia Bar Or. An early, very impressive work by Ori Reisman, *Red Cow* (1954), Siona Tagger's *Lemonade Vendor* (1944), and Aharon Bezalel's wood statue stand out.

"Treasures of the Mishkan Museum" leaves the impression that this is a collection imbued with social and historical sensitivity, and less engaged in theory. A collection that in the past might have been perceived as conservative turns out to be very interesting and even challenging.